

The Fifth Sunday in Lent-Year B-The Rev. Charles LaFond 3.17.24

Sermon, John 12:24 “unless a grain of wheat falls **into** the Earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. “

*(Note to reader: This document was written to be spoken, not read, and so punctuation is designed differently in the tradition of oral presentation.)*

With all due respect to the Book of Genesis, I LOVE biting into a cold, crisp apple – seeds notwithstanding.

“...unless a grain of wheat falls **INTO** the Earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit. “

I wonder if you heard something odd in the wording of that often-quoted phrase? One word that was odd.

Close your eyes for a moment.

Imagine an Iron-age girl or one today - running through a wheatfield.

Imagine her delight- the sun on her face, and her hands opened wide- fingers splayed out, both hands brushing across the top of patterned wheat kernels, clustered in rows atop wheat stems.

Thump, thump, thump as her fingers touch wheat kernels. Bare feet on soil kept moist early in the morning by the high wheat, protecting the dew from immediate scorching.

Imagine that one single grain of wheat, knocked by her pinky finger and tumbling, tumbling, tumbling, towards the ground as her laughter fades into the distance, someplace in Israel or Palestine. The grain of wheat - imagine it hits the ground.

Imagine the grain of wheat - in that baking heat, moist at first and green on the dry surface of the soil. The green grain falls. The grain browns, The grain bakes, The grain dies.

The green grain, browns and shrivels- a shell, holding and imprisoning the green grain inside, until what? Until it browns and is grounded to flour?

But no, it is on the dirt. No one will gather that grain of wheat. They will cut and gather other grains at the top of plants at harvest, but not **that** grain of wheat, not the grain of wheat that falls. It is on the Earth, on the soil, laying there, waiting, shriveling, hardening. Dying

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So return with me to where we begin the text. “unless a grain of wheat falls **into** the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

The little word I find so curious - a word translated from the Greek and the Latin and then to English – the word they chose was “**into**” – “unless a grain of wheat falls **into** the Earth and dies it remains a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.

When the writers of these words wrote them, they had two words from which to choose. The seed could fall **onto** the Earth, or the seed could fall **into** the Earth. The Greek word was Se (Say) meaning into or within. A different Greek word “pepano se” - meant **onto**. In my experience a seed falls **onto** the Earth, and yet these writers wrote that the seed falls **into** the earth. It’s missing a step.

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These last two days, spring has sprung as a harbinger of Easter. As Lenten days lengthen, Spring reminds us of the power of transitions.

This reading, and indeed, all of Lent, indeed, the entire church year, - well even the entire natural year - is a series of transitions. Just as life is a series of deaths, waiting, healing, and regeneration. Easter, my friends, began as a celebration long before Christianity. It is much older than our Easter. Druids had a version. Many cultures did.

Everyone of us, you and me, we all experienced deaths, large and small - in youth, middle age and as we age more, and begin to die. Aging takes tremendous courage.

But the process takes time, just like that grain of wheat will take time to be **pushed into** the Earth where it can moisten, crack open, sprout, and grow.

Each one of us has experienced deaths from transitions.

- A dead childhood
- A dead adolescence (we hope!)
- A dead marriage
- A dead friendship
- I dead vocation
- A dead child

- A dead decision
- A dead revelation
- A dead god (small G!)
- A dead religion
- A dead denomination
- A dead career
- A dead pet
- A dead hope...

They fall into the dark hummus of earthiness, were leaves and sticks, and animals have been rotting for millennia, and it is in that darkness, in that decay, in that nutrient-rich soil – it is *in* the soil not *on* the soil, that death is transformed into new life - to bear fruit.

We Americans are not living longer, we are aging longer. We find it hard to have conversations about the transition we call aging. People would rather talk to me about homelessness, starvation, sex, taxes and nuclear war -- than about aging. And we find it especially hard to discuss the transitions within our own aging process. The deaths - they speed up. The deaths of our capacity, the deaths of our friends, the deaths of our memory, the deaths of our muscles, the deaths of our plans, the deaths of our domination.

But the reason so many religions hold a pivotal resurrection story in Spring, is because we **see** it happen every spring. It makes sense of life. We see it happen in our lives. We see it happen on the planet, and in our bodies.

This awakening process is the purple of Lent – the color of the pre-dawn – or as Thomas Merton calls it “le point Vierge” - the virgin point of the day, - pre-dawn – that point at which all wilderness rests in stillness – about 3:00 AM (which may be why we humans so often awaken then, and die then). The natural world pauses, bows to The Creator, asking permission to exist - and is then granted permission to enter and have one more new day. One more miraculous day. Who grants that permission? That’s a mystery too. The answer is above my paygrade.

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I’m not going to stand here and tell you about heaven and Hell. It’s a mystery.

I’m not here to explain redemption and resurrection. It’s for smarter and holier people than me.

I'm not sure what people thought 2000 years ago when these words were gathered for this book "...a single grain, but if it dies..."

But this I do know – I know that what life, on this singularly beautiful blue and green planet, floating in a cosmos of lifeless grey rocks – what this life has taught me, is that which is going on in the dark brown clay and dirt under our feet – full of mycelium mushroom networks, and trillions of tiny creatures, marching through decaying death to make clay. I know about clay.

What is real and true, is the miraculous 700-trillion-to-one-odds that each of us would be born at all, and have life - bear fruit at all from life so amazingly made possible because one of our Dad's swimmers crashed into one of our mother's eggs.

I don't know what resentments and failures and hurts and deaths, you have experienced that have dropped you into the clay of your own transfiguration, but I do know this, this one thing – I know that new life – new growth – new love, new kindness, can come from your life if you let it. **if** it dies and **if** breaks open.

We are born – that alone is a miracle – then we live. And though we begin soft, adorable, sweet, smooth, giggling and rosy, we age into wrinkles, bad smells, scars internal and external, thin skin and ultimately needing the same help as an elderly person, that we needed as a baby. We enter alone and die alone in our skin-boundery. As a society, we rush in to help babies and puppies – but as a society, I notice, that we avert our eyes from elderly dogs and elderly humans.

I have raised money to ease human suffering since three days after I graduated from college without one day between jobs. I am now 60 years old. What I've learned in that 60 years of raising 80 million dollars, is mostly this **one single thing**:

**to be generous, one must first be aware - and then - grateful.**

You and I both know the Ebenezer Scrooge story. I wish there was an Easter version - perhaps I'll write it one day. 10 years ago, 70% of Americans made donations to charities. Today 50% of Americans make donations to charities. What's going on?

I am sure we will all fall into the earth and die. Some of us will bear much fruit. Others led selfish lives. So, as you plan, your last-will-and-testament, - as you plan what you do with your estate, as you decide on your living-will, your terms of your death, your funeral hymns – the buffet - I don't have much to say about eternal life. It remains, at least to me, a

mystery. But I do know about **this life, at least a little bit**. And I suggest you buy the unvarnished pine box version of a coffin. Go ahead. Disappoint the undertaker.

Because an apple that you ate that one time --- do you remember it? ---- do you remember how cold and crunchy and juicy that apple was? --- Well there may be a seed from that apple in your intestines somewhere. Right now. And when you fall into the Earth and die, headstone or not, it is very possible that a massive apple tree may grow from where you fall into the Earth.

And so every kind word, every honest word, every good deed that you have ever done, every gift given to ease human suffering – will bear much fruit.

But the seed in you that dies... it grows inside all of your broken pain, which is its rich, loamy, living, soil.